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ABSTRACT

Patterns of personality development leading to psychological health at age 50 were compared in 24 women and 21 men, studied longitudinally since adolescence. Personality Q sorts at four ages--early and late teens, ages 40 and 50--were used to assess personality change and overall psychological health. Q sorts were based on extensive data and applied independently at each age level. Among "healthy" men and women at age 50, two patterns of development were identified: (1) A stable pattern consisting of 7 men and 7 women whose health had remained high and stable from ages 40 to 50; (2) An improved pattern consisting of 14 men and 17 women whose health was poor at 40 but improved significantly by 50. Sex differences within each pattern were analyzed in terms of the fit between personality and sex role conformity. Personalities of stable men and women fit traditional sex roles. Traditional men and women moved smoothly into middle age with little change in life style. Personalities of male and female improvers were less congurent with traditional sex roles. Nontraditional men and women supressed cross-sex characteristics in early adulthood but revived these characteristics by age 50 with upsurge in psychological health. (Author)

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Sex Differences in Personality Development in the Middle Adult Years: A Longitudinal Study[1]

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How do sex roles shape personality in the middle adult years? Patterns of personality development leading to psychological health at age 50 were compared in women and men, studied since adolescence, who are members of the longitudinal Oakland Growth Study at the Institute of Human Development, University of California, Berkeley. This study began in 1932 with roughly 200 boys and girls at 11 years of age. They were observed continuously during their junior and senior high school years and interviewed again intensively at ages 40 and 50. They were born in 1921. All are white.

The California Q sort (Block, 1961: Block in collaboration with Haan, 1971) was used to rate personality characteristics at four age periods: early and late adolescence, ages 40 and 50. The Q sorts yielded measures of personality change over time and an index of overall psychological health (Livson and Peskin, 1967).

I selected the healthiest members of the sample at age 50 for the present study: 21 men and 24 women who scored above the mean on the index of psychological health. Among these "healthy" men and women at age 50, two patterns emerged: 1) A stable pattern consisting of 7 men and 7 women whose health had remained high and stable from ages 40 to 50: 2) An improver pattern consisting of 14 men and 17 women whose health was poor at 40 but improved significantly by 50. I will describe differences between stable and improver groups for each sex separately. First the men.

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Men

Stable men at 50 are intellectual and overcontrolled. (They do not differ from improvers in tested IQ at this or earlier ages.) These are men who value rationality and self-discipline, qualities suited to sex role norms for high-achieving men in middle-class American culture. I will label this group Traditional men.

Improvers at 50 are emotionally expressive, sensuous men, talkative, gregarious, and outgoing. These are characteristics commonly linked to feminine sex-role sterotypes. I will call this group Non-Traditional. They are more other-oriented than Traditional men and less controlled.

Both groups at 50 are highly successful in their work careers with occupations at the major executive and professional level. All are husbands and fathers--most with some children still at home.

To trace the earlier development of these two groups, I will describe personality differences at each of the age periods sampled. Both groups reveal a central personality style in adolescence that evolves over the life span, moving toward or away from conventional sex-typing.

Traditional men, from adolescence on, are self-controlled and value thinking rather than feeling. In their teens, they shape their intellectuality into an analytic, skeptical attitude, straightforward, productive and ambitious. Their personalities are geared toward achievement and fit masculine role expectations--but at the price of spontaneity.

By age 40, they continue to value rationality and intellectual control. Their psychological health is high by this age and remains high by age 50. Their personalities change little between 40 and 50. Traditional men maintain a consistent, masculine orientation over the life span.

Non-Traditional men are emotionally expressive in adolescence, as they are at age 50. But their emotionality in youth is histrionic and impulsive. They seem unable to integrate either the expressive or the assertive sides of themselves in their teens. They fail to foreclose on either a masculine or a feminine mode in adolescence.

By age 40, Non-Traditional men seem to have made a choice. They suppress their emotionality in favor of active, instrumental behavior. Expressiveness drops off; self-control increases. However, their masculinity at 40 is power-oriented and exploitative--colored by a macho quality. They seem to engage in a kind of masculine protest--but uneasily and at a high cost. Their defenses are brittle, easily punctured. They are hostile and generally anxious. I suggest that their stress results from suppressing their emotionality to fulfill sex-role expectations for high-achieving men.

By age 50, Non-Traditional men give up this masculine protest. They become more nurturant and sensual. Their power-orientation drops off and their anxiety declines. They integrate the expressive, more conventionally feminine side of themselves. To use a term recently come into fashion, they become more androgynous by age 50. Their psychological health now rises to match the level of Traditional men.

Women

Do women show parallel changes? Two groups of psychologically healthy women at 50 were similarly identified: a stable group and an improver group. Both groups are predominantly upper-middle class. All are mothers; half of both groups still have children at home.

Stable women, like stable men, have personalities that fit traditional sex roles. These are gregarious, nurturant feminine women at 50, placing

high value on affiliation with others. Their personalities fit well with their roles as wives and mothers. Their life styles are more domestic than those of improvers; none have occupational careers.

From adolescence to age 50, Traditional women develop and elaborate the feminine, affiliative side of their personalities. Like Traditional men, they move smoothly through the middle years at a high level of psychological health and with little change in sex-typed behavior. Traditional women and men follow parallel careers.

Women improvers, like male improvers, do not conform to traditional sex-role stereotypes. Their personalities stress qualities usually ascribed to men in our culture--and suited to male roles. These Non-Traditional women value thinking and achievement. At 50, they are skeptical, insightful, and unconventional, oriented toward intellectual mastery rather than feelings or affiliation. In adolescence, they are ambitious and appear brighter than Traditional women. (Like men, they do not differ from the Traditional group in tested IQ.)

By age 40, Non-Traditional women suppress their intellectuality and achievement drives. They become constricted and depressed. Their psychological careers parallel those of Non-Traditional men who deny their emotionality by this age. Both put aside opposite-sex characteristics in order, I suggest, to function successfully in conventional adult sex roles: achievement for the men, mothering for the women. Both pay a price for this suppression in emotional stress and poor psychological health.

By age 50, however, both women and men revive cross-sex characteristics. Non-Traditional women revive their intellectuality and their goal-oriented skills, men their emotionality. Both sexes become more androgynous by 50 with

an upsurge in psychological health.

Whether this becomes possible because women begin to disengage from mothering by age 50 and men come to terms with their achievements, or whether it reflects shifts in time perspective or other age-related changes is uncertain. Probably all of these play a part. Sex norms may simply become less rigid for people in the second half of life--or may even converge. [The findings of Neugarten and Gutmann (1958) and a recent study by Chiriboga and Thurnher (1975) suggest that women become more tolerant of assertive and men of affiliative needs as they age. These studies support Jung's clinical observations that men and women develop previously suppressed opposite-sex characteristics in the second half of life (Jung, 1933).]

The patterns described here illustrate how sex roles interact with personality to shape development in the adult years. A key factor seems to be the fit between personality and social role. Women and men whose personalities match traditional sex roles move smoothly through adulthood with little change in sex-typed behavior. Women and men whose personalities do not fit traditional roles may suppress opposite-sex characteristics to fulfill these roles--and pay a heavy price in emotional stress. But middle age can open fresh options to diversify sex roles--and expand the boundaries of the self.

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